

*Sunday Worship  
A Service for Your Use at Home  
St Paul United Church of Christ  
5312 Old Blue Rock Road  
Cincinnati, Ohio 45247  
Allen M Fluent, Pastor*

*September 27, 2020*

*Because of the pandemic caused by the corona virus, our congregation, along with many others, has decided that we must forego gathered worship services at this time. Each Sunday until we gather again, we will provide worship materials that members and friends can use in our homes in the knowledge that we are not alone, but are celebrating these holy days with our friends and neighbors in the faith. As you use this worship service, I hope you will pause and remember the tune to a familiar hymn as you read the words, and pray as partners in the fellowship of Christ.*

*If you have access to a computer or cell phone, you may want to open the video recordings of the Scripture and Sermon provided by the pastor and the music for our hymn played by Della Leytze, on both our church website and the message sent to all who are on our email list.*

*Today is the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, the first Sunday in Autumn.*

*As we begin our worship on this Sunday, let us join together in our opening hymn. (Those who receive our emails have a recording of the music played by Della Leytze in our sanctuary.) Our hymn is "Sweet Hour of Prayer."*

***Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer, that calls me from a world of care,  
And bids me at my Father's throne make all my wants and wishes known.  
In seasons of distress and grief my soul has often found relief,  
And oft escaped the tempter's snare by your return, sweet hour of prayer.***

***Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer, the joys I feel, the bliss I share  
Of those whose anxious spirits burn with strong desires for your return!  
With such I hasten to the place where God my Savior shows his face,  
And gladly take my station there, and wait for you, sweet hour of prayer.***

***Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer, your wings shall my petition bear  
To him whose truth and faithfulness engage the waiting soul to bless.  
And since he bids me seek his face, believe his Word and trust his grace,  
I'll cast on him my every care, and wait for you, sweet hour of prayer.***

Our reading from the Psalms for this morning is Psalm 78, verses 1-4 and 13-16

*Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done... In the sight of their ancestors he worked marvels in the land of Egypt, in the fields of Zoan. He divided the sea and let them pass through it, and made the waters stand like a heap. In the daytime he led them with a cloud, and all night long with a fiery light. He split rocks open in the wilderness, and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep. He made streams come out of the rock, and caused waters to flow down like rivers.*

This morning we turn to a story from the Old Testament as our primary Bible lesson for the day. We read from the Book of Exodus, chapter 17, verses 1-7:

*From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses, and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"*

*(Note: In Hebrew, Massah means test, and Meribah means quarrel)*

*The Sermon:*

*(Note: For those who want to see and hear a video of the complete sermon you can find it on our church website or open the message that you will receive if you have given us your email address.)*

**One of the most peaceful journeys I have ever taken was a cruise on the Nile River in Egypt. The Nile is a quiet river, but it provides the livelihood of the communities along its banks. The farms along the shoreline are lush and green, but not very far beyond, the landscape turns dry and extends to the west into a vast desert land. It is the dry climate of this area that has made it possible for archeologists to make wonderful discoveries of treasures preserved for unimaginable millennia in this ancient land. To the east as well, there is an arid strip of land that meets the Red Sea, and today holds the watered gardens of resort hotels that line the beach. Across from the Sea is the barren wilderness described in the Book of Exodus, a place of testing.**

**The Nile provides the gift of water, and, when it periodically floods, it leaves the rich sediment in which plants for food are grown. If we had lived in the days of the Exodus, we would have seen how difficult it would be to leave such a place as this, where even a life of servitude might seem to provide more creature comforts, at least to the belly, than the harsh, dry surrounding environment of the wilderness.**

**Moses took the people out of servitude in Egypt, but, before they arrived in the promised land, they thirsted for forty years in the desert. Since forty years brought a whole new generation, and those who started out were not the same as those who finally bathed their feet in the River Jordan, it could be said that those who crossed the sea with Moses were thirsty for the rest of their lives. How costly freedom was for them!**

**Our story for this morning took place very close to the outset of the people's journey into the Sinai desert, perhaps two or three months from their forced emancipation from Egypt. Like the story in last Sunday's lesson about the manna, this is a miracle story, and, like all miracle stories, it is an**

invitation to us to ask about its metaphors, to wonder what water signified to those who heard the story in ancient Israel, and to imaginatively think about our own thirst, both physical and spiritual, and what it would mean for Moses to strike the rock and let the gift of God's water flow for us in our lives today.

The rivers and the wilderness in the biblical story are figures in a very symbolic geography. In the Book of Genesis, we learn of a mythic river that watered the Garden of Eden, then branched out to form four streams. Two of those streams were the Tigris and Euphrates, in the ancestral land of the Hebrew people, where Abraham was born. And then there was the Nile, which sustained the land of Egypt and provided sanctuary for the Hebrew people in the time of Joseph when a famine destroyed the croplands of Canaan. When the people left the banks of the Nile, they were headed to a new home where once again a river provided the water needed for a settled life. Throughout the story, rivers were in the places that people called home and settled down. The wilderness, on the other hand, was never home, but always the place of journey. It was a thirsty place of dry wind, and unvegetated rock. In the mind of the people, what more appropriate place could there be to test the faithfulness of God; and in God's mind, what better place to test the faithfulness of people? You'll notice that there is mutuality in this. That's what is meant when we call our form of religion a "covenantal faith." It is not so much about dogma as it is about relationship. We promise faithfulness to the just ways of God, and we trust that God is faithful, and that the ways of God's justice will bring wholeness and healing to our lives.

Then we go into the wilderness!

What's your wilderness today? It may be one thing, or it could be many. It may be your personal time of trial, or it could be something all of us are going through. There are a myriad of ways people experience wilderness in their lives. Long illness or the illness of someone we love can make us thirst for health and wholeness. Isolation due to the pandemic can depress our spirits and make us long for friends. Personal failures, loss of employment, homelessness, and grief, or just a time when our future seems unclear can all

feel like walking through the wilderness to us. Sometimes people say those things feel like a personal drought. For some people, the political uncertainty of this election season seems like a wilderness walk, especially when good friends find themselves in different places, and the rhetoric is hurtful. Many of us are growing tired of waiting until we can go out in public or on vacations again. All of us wait with apprehension or impatience for some medical assurance that we are safe again from the pandemic. We need to be conscious and more understanding than we sometimes are of those among us who fear the unrest in our cities and those among us who are afraid of the police. For some of us, there is worry that some of our basic institutions, like the church, may be fading in influence in our world. It seems this year in particular that lots of us are tired of being on a dry and desolate road. We're ready to sink our feet into the river of home. We're calling out like kids from the back seat, "Are we there yet?"

"We've been here on this march through the wilderness for more than two months," the Israelites grumbled. "We remember the fresh water we enjoyed from the Nile, and we know there are no rivers in this desert. We think you never should have set us free, and we're thinking about going back to where life was not so hard again." And that's when something wonderful happened. The story says that God climbed up on a rock and told Moses to hit the rock with his staff; and when Moses did it, water flowed out, enough for all of them to drink.

Now here's the thing about miracles. They're wonderful, but they have some limitations: You never know when one is coming, and they hold no promise for the future. The story doesn't say, but I've suspected someone in the crowd must have whispered, "That's fine for today, but how about tomorrow?" But that's when faith has to take over for a really long time.

Why did God give the people a miracle at this particular time? The story doesn't explain it, but I have a suspicion that I know. They're just a couple of months along on their journey, and God hasn't had enough time yet to teach them anything. So all God can do is give them another miracle to keep them going. When they get to the sacred mountain, there will be time to tell them

**what God wants them to do. Until then, they'll just have to stumble along one miracle at a time.**

**The truth is, so do we. But unlike the Israelites on those early days of the journey, we've already been to the mountain; so we know what God expects us to do. It was at Mt Sinai that the people heard the behavior God expects of us. We learned about the commandments, the ten famous ones and lots of others, that talk about caring for one another, and welcoming the immigrant, and sharing what we have. Then we also received some other lessons that came to the world in a later time – the words of the prophets about justice for the poor, and kindness and humility, and then, in the fullness of time, the message of Jesus about the truth of God's love that we call the Gospel. By such grace, God has prepared us to continue our journey in faith.**

**Of course, we still make our errors, like they did in the Sinai desert, finding idols to worship, like power or wealth or any of the many other temptations that afflict us and cause us to die morally. We still test God and quarrel with one another. And sometimes we also want to go back to Egypt – to settle for an imperfect world, because it's easier than struggling through the wilderness to get to the other side. And truthfully, we've never seen our own River Jordan, so sometimes we don't believe in it, though God has promised that we will get there, and told us to pray for the heavenly kingdom to come on earth.. So we continue to live by faith.**

#### **Our Time of Prayer**

We continue to pray this week for the people in California and Oregon who are losing homes and farmlands in the raging wildfires, and for those whose lives have been disrupted by the hurricane winds and flooding in our southern states. We pray for those families that are suffering from violence, and for all those who work every day to bring that violence to an end. We pray for everyone who is affected by the CoVid 19 epidemic – those who are sick, those who treat the sick, those confined to hospitals unable to be with relatives and friends, and those who are battling depression at home. And we pray for our nation in this election

season, so filled with angry voices and mixed, confusing messages. We pray for the earth, for the trees, for the water and air, that we may turn from those practices that harm our planet. God grant that whatever wilderness we may be experiencing in our lives we will feel the assurance of being surrounded by our community of love and grace. God in your mercy, hear our prayer.

**Let us** pray in the words of our Lord Jesus:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom  
come, Thy will be  
done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and  
forgive us our  
debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but  
deliver us from  
evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever.  
Amen.**

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God our Heavenly Parent, and  
the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.**

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**REMINDER:**

Sunday, September 27<sup>th</sup> at 6:30 pm, there will be an outdoor worship service in the yard between the church and the cemetery.

All are invited to participate in this service. Bring your own chair, and following the CDC guidelines, we will social distance and also wear masks.